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THE EDUCATION OF OUR BOYS AND GIRLS

BY

CHARLES W. ELIOT, LL.D.
President of Harvard University

AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION
BOSTON

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THE EDUCATION OF OUR BOYS AND GIRLS.*

BY CHARLES W. ELIOT, LL.D., PRESIDENT OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

It is always discouraging to attempt to talk about education, because everything has already been said. Plato thousands of years ago made a statement of the theory of education which has never been improved upon; and all down the centuries we come upon theoretical statements of the philosophy of education which remain good to this day, and which describe wise processes and methods of education, which have never yet been realized in the world. Nobody can outdo Milton's description of the education of a gentleman. Montaigne in France gives a perfect description of the wise discipline for children; and that at a time when the discipline of children in school and home was often rude and even brutal. You cannot improve much on Locke's theory of education. Shakespeare put the whole gist of the elective principle in education into two lines: —

> "Small profit comes where is no pleasure taken.
> Study, sir, what you most affect."

In short, it is characteristic of the subject of education that the theory of it has been over and over again ex-

*An address to the Ministers' Institute [Unitarian] at Worcester, Mass.

pounded almost to perfection, and yet practice lags far, far behind the theoretical statement; and the men and women who have done most in our day to improve education are those who have succeeded in putting into practice small portions of the ample theory of education which has long been at the disposition of the educated generations. It is the getting the right principles into practice which remains still in great part to be done.

But, then, there is another difficulty in regard to education which seems always to be postponing the day when the theory of the ancient philosophers or of the mediæval philosophers can be carried out. One trouble in education is this,— that the life for which we would educate youth is constantly changing. The life for which we would educate our youth to-day is a very different life from that for which my generation had to be prepared. The life into which the generation of Harvard youth to-day is going out is a life wonderfully different from that into which the Harvard youth of thirty years ago went out. Now, if the life for which we train children differs from that which went before, the methods of the training, or the subjects, or both, must differ. Plato illustrates this difference to perfection. He described the admirable education of a Greek free citizen when nineteen-twentieths of Greek society were slaves; and he distinctly says that as to the mass of mankind, as to the laboring classes, they need no education whatever. Therefore, however perfect Plato's theories, to-day's practice must have in mind a very different subsequent life of the trained youth in the society of to-day.

But I want to come at once to a part of the subject of education which has specific application to the religious body represented here,— the Unitarians. The mere ex-

istence of a body of Unitarian people is a striking phenomenon in the world. It never could have existed in peace and safety until this century. There are only seventy-five thousand of us to-day in the United States; but the fact that those seventy-five thousand people,— mostly educated people, mostly skilled people, mostly persons of intelligence, holding useful positions in the world, — the very fact that those seventy-five thousand people exist, and work, and think, and are free in our community, shows that the community for which we prepare our children is something unspeakably different from any community that ever existed before. So I think that Unitarians ought to take thought for the education of their children as Unitarians. We are a very peculiar set of people. We represent principles of thought which did not get expression in the world until our theological ancestors and preceptors had their being in the early part of this century. Now it is well known that Unitarians as a class take an unusual interest in problems of education. It has always been so in this country. It is just the same in England. It is just the same in Hungary. They have very good reason for so doing. They won their liberty of thought through education. They hope that their children are to enjoy further liberty of thought through better education. The Unitarians are as a body singularly influential in the community,—in whatever community they exist. They owe this strong influence to the very doctrines they have imbibed. They owe it to the independence of thought which led them to accept and hold these free doctrines. They owe it to the constitution of their minds, which inevitably inclined them to be or to become Unitarians. How is this power to be transmitted? How is this power,

due to the very nature of our theological opinions and to their intellectual consequences, to be transmitted generation after generation?

I shall have to begin, I think, with the little children. Education seems to be more important, and to give more striking results in its later stages than in its earlier; but I imagine that, if we could clearly see the educative effect of the mother, the father, and the brothers and sisters, in its relation to the childish mind, to the scope of that mind, we should see that the educative process before ten years of age is really more important and more productive than in any other period of life. Now how can the mode of thought which we Unitarians value be cultivated in the little children? We intrust little children to Sunday-schools; but they are there for a brief half-hour out of the week, and the teacher is not always skilled, and has not always the personal influence on the child without which little can be done for children. Is there any universally applicable method through which we can insure in little children the unconscious reception of the leading ideas of the Unitarian faith? I believe there is, and I believe that this method should be used in all Unitarian families and all Unitarian churches. It is the method of committing poetry to memory. I heard Dr. Crothers quoting somebody last Sunday to the effect that religion is poetry; but somebody else amended that statement by saying that religion is poetry believed. The amendment is important. Can we put into the childish mind through poetry a religion it will believe? We may be perfectly certain that no child ever got any religion out of a catechism. It takes an adult with the tendency to metaphysics to get anything out of a catechism. Will not a child unconsciously get religion out of poetry, if it be well selected?

I have seen the experiment tried in a fair number of instances,—not enough instances for a general conclusion, but in a fair number of instances,—and I never knew it to fail. In order to give you an impression of the actual working of the method, I must enter into a few particulars. Take such a poem as Longfellow's "Village Blacksmith," a very simple poem of universal sentiments, and let the child at an appropriate age commit the whole of it to memory, so that it can recite it whenever asked for. Some of the most fundamental conceptions of religion, some of the most fundamental conceptions of the new science of sociology, will enter the child's mind with that poem. Of course, as in all poetry, a great deal of what we may call information, or suggested knowledge, is conveyed in even a single verse. Take the verse,

> "He hears his daughter's voice
> Singing in the village choir,
> And it makes his heart rejoice.
>
> "It sounds to him like her mother's voice
> Singing in Paradise!"

Now any child eight or ten years old will take that all in, and will learn from it that the blacksmith had a daughter who could sing, and she sang sweetly in the village choir; and the blacksmith had had a wife whom he loved tenderly and she was dead, and she sang when with him, and now she was singing in a happy next world, in Paradise; and the blacksmith liked to go to church because he heard his daughter who reminded him of her mother. All that is in that little verse; and it is a beautiful picture of some of the best parts of human experience.

Take another poem, very well known to us all, but

seldom used, it seems to me, for children,—Leigh Hunt's "Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase)." There is a poem that any child of ten years old will take in, and it presents a series of delightful pictures; and at the end comes a very compact statement of the whole Unitarian theory about character.

Another invaluable poem for religious education is Bryant's "Waterfowl." (These are all Unitarian poets, by the way.) The whole Unitarian view of the Providence of God is presented to the child in that lovely poem,—God is guiding the bird through the pathless air, and just as he guides the bird he will guide me. It is the simplest possible presentation to a child's mind of the loving Fatherhood of God.

We may, of course, use hymns for these purposes; and abundant material exists in all our collections.

Conder's

> "Beyond, beyond the boundless sea,
> Above that dome of sky,
> Farther than thought itself can flee";

Addison's

> "The spacious firmament on high,
> With all the blue ethereal sky,"—

what pictures of the majesty of the heavens they present! How welcome, how natural, to the childish mind!

Edmund H. Sears, another Unitarian poet, wrote

> "Calm on the listening ear of night
> Come heaven's melodious strains,
> Where wild Judæa stretches far
> Her silver-mantled plains."

In that poem he presents in the most attractive possible way the myth of the angels singing at the birth of Jesus; and he presents it again in his other poem,

> "It came upon the midnight clear,
> That glorious song of old."

The Bible contains some passages the imagery of which should be impressed on the minds of all our children at a very early age. Two or three of the Psalms,— "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," "The heavens declare the glory of God,"— two or three sentences,— single verses of the Bible,— every child should learn by heart, and hold right through his life.

A few years ago I was asked by Brig.-Gen. Casey to prepare some inscriptions for eight tablets to stand over eight allegorical statues in the great reading-room of the Congressional Library. One of the statues represented Religion. He wanted inscriptions, seventy-two letters long, about religion and seven other great subjects. I sent him one of the best definitions of religion that has ever been written, and one of the most complete statements of the most attractive doctrine of modern sociology, — "So we being many are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another." I thought it was appropriate in a National Library,— "One from many." But Gen. Casey came down to his office one morning with my letter in his hand, and said to his second in command, Mr. Bernard Greene, now superintendent of the building (another Unitarian, by the way): "President Eliot has sent me eight inscriptions. I like them all but one. That one is about religion. It is too Christian. I don't feel well to-day. I wish you would write a letter to Dr. Eliot, and ask him to give me another inscription to go

over the statue of Religion." Gen. Casey went to his house, and in an hour he was dead. In a day or two Mr. Greene wrote me, asking if under these circumstances I would prepare or suggest another inscription. I fell back on Micah,— "What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God?" And that is written over the statue of Religion. Those two sentences every child of our faith ought to learn and hold to. They will never get a better definition of religion than Micah's.

I must not tarry longer on this part of my theme. I believe in the conveying to the minds of little children through poetry all the fundamental doctrines of the Unitarian faith. I believe it can be done with pleasure to the child, with delight to the parents. I am sure of the last, for I have tried it.

Now what next, after childhood? We come now to the stage called "secondary education," which ought to cover from twelve to eighteen years of age or thereabouts. Boys of this age seem singularly impervious to the ordinary methods of religious instruction,— girls, perhaps, less so. I am not very sure about that, because I have had no daughters, and there are no girls in Harvard College; but I am told that girls are less impervious to religious instruction between twelve and eighteen than boys. At this age, however, the minds of youth are open to a good many things which are very precious to us, and which ought to be precious to us. They are open to all heroic thought. They are generally open to free thought, to any delineation of character or description of events impregnated with the idea of liberty. If any of us want to do anything in this world of a durable character, let us take pains to mix our doing always with some new atom

of freedom. Nothing else stands in this world, in religion or education or politics. The durable thing in this world is that which is associated with the growth of human liberty. All our Unitarian prophets have been teachers of liberty. The greatest of them all, Channing, gave the greater part of his life to the teaching of liberty of thought. Freedom to think, freedom to act, freedom for the individual, freedom for society, freedom for the slave, one of the most elementary forms of the preaching of liberty,— all our Unitarian teachers and poets have made much of this side of their teaching; and, in doing so, they have fastened to something which is eternal. Now the mind of youth between twelve and eighteen will grasp and hold all such ideas. Therefore use this mode of interesting them and instructing them in what is, after all, a fundamental conception of our faith. Instruct them in the doctrine of liberty, and illustrate it by the best human examples in all fields.

When we come to the details of a course of instruction, of a programme of studies, there is room for great difference of opinion, for prolonged discussion. The faculty of Harvard College was three years debating the advisable requirements for admission to Harvard College from now on through the next generation. It took three years to come to a conclusion. When they reached their conclusion, nineteen twenty-sixths of the requirements, so called, were in subjects prescribed; and there remained seven twenty-sixths only for choice. Therefore we are in no danger at present in our country of not finding in the classifications of secondary education enough prescription, something uniformly required of each highly educated youth, girl or boy. I ought to add, perhaps, that Harvard College is not more conservative than other Ameri-

can institutions. But the programme of studies is not so important an element in school work as many of us imagine. It does not make so much difference what a girl or boy studies, as how he studies and with whom he studies. For myself, I think the safest way in the education of a single individual child is to find out, if you can, what that individual child likes most in the way of intellectual exertion and does best, and then see to it that that child gets instruction in that thing if he gets nothing else. Make sure of that. It is astonishing how little we really need to know of what are called essential subjects. How little we really need to know of arithmetic, for instance, — next to nothing,— only the power of adding and subtracting and multiplying small numbers,— certainly nothing above ten in the head. I observe in the ordinary grammar school programmes of this country that it is not considered necessary for a child of fourteen to have studied any geometry at all, the subject of geometry being reserved for high schools. That is one of the most extraordinary exclusions that the world sees at present, geometry having been almost from the time of its invention, thousands of years ago, an element of great value in intellectual training. Still our children get along excellently well until they are some fourteen years of age without any geometry.

As to languages, there surely is no necessity of our children's knowing any language but English or any literature but English; because through English we may get all that is most valuable in every other literature. Therefore, it is a safe doctrine throughout secondary education to require only the barest elements of subjects which we are perfectly certain have some practical applications, and to guide the training of every mind on those subjects

which the child most affects, as Shakespeare says. There is not a subject in all the range of human knowledge that will not develop to a high degree every mental faculty in a mind which loves it. And, after all, the object in secondary education is always — not primarily only, but primarily, secondarily, and always — to win power, to win the capacity to use one's mind with clearness, accuracy, precision, grasp, and productiveness. That is the object of education.

Now, passing beyond the secondary school, we come to the university or college or the technical school. There the same principles apply, only the gates are thrown wide open, and full choice appears — the choice a boy makes when he decides on a profession, for example, and goes to the School of Technology; the choice which a youth in college makes when he says, I will devote myself to history and government and economics, because I am going to be a lawyer or a politician. At that stage of education the full principle of liberty is brought into play. Never be afraid of that. It is academic freedom. It is the way to power. All the great men of past times who have conferred unmeasured benefits on the world through their own intellectual triumphs have shown their intellectual capacities long before they were twenty years old. In fact, if a boy or youth does not show remarkable capacity in this subject or that before he is twenty years old, the chances are a thousand to one he never will.

But how about character? Character is the object of education. Character is the object of the Unitarian religion. I have seen for thirty years a steady stream of youth coming to the university, eighteen or nineteen years of age. In almost every instance the character of the youth is determined before he goes to college. He has

determined the way he faces before he goes to college. That is the all-important thing in this world: Which way do you face — up hill or down? We all of us slip and fall; but we can all of us face the right way, pick ourselves up and try again, if we fall. But it does not do to face down hill. You fall further, and it is harder to get up. Now that facing is almost invariably determined in a boy before he is eighteen years old. Hence the importance of founding schools where Unitarian children can be taught to face the Unitarian way. There is a wonderful difference in the effect on a boy's mind — and I think it must be the same with a girl's mind — between the influence of the Unitarian ideas of God, Jesus, religion, and human society, and the old-fashioned Evangelical ideas on those tremendous themes. We Unitarians have been neglectful of that tremendous difference, and we have sent our children to schools where there was no religious influence or to schools where there was a religious influence utterly opposed to our own views of God and Jesus and religion and human society. I have known Unitarian parents to do that from the most trivial motives,— because some nice boys or nice girls were going to that school; because there was a head of the school whose manners were good, and who could teach the boys the conventions of society; because in a given school there were none but sons of very well-to-do people. I say these motives are trivial, yet they have often been the motives for selecting this school or that by Unitarian parents.

This neglect is analogous to another neglect which we Unitarians have too long been guilty of,— the neglect to take pains to propagate the faith that is in us. I had occasion, in addressing a Unitarian Club in Chicago not long ago, to tell a story of a most excellent man, promi-

nent in all good works in Boston, who, when asked to subscribe to a new fund for our Divinity School, said he would not give a cent to make a man a Unitarian who could help being a Unitarian. We have had a precious doctrine committed to our care. We have had the privilege of inheriting from our leaders in the faith a literature of utmost value. We have heard with our ears preaching that ought to have resounded through the country; and we have done how little to spread this preaching, these writings! We ought to cause to be pointed out to all our children the main features of the history of the Unitarian movement. We ought to bring to the knowledge of our children the lives of all the Unitarian saints and heroes. We ought to show and declare that the acceptance of the doctrines of liberty is not inconsistent with the deepest and sincerest piety. Many people think of Unitarians as iconoclasts, destroyers of the faith and beauty of the world, as people who would annihilate reverence and respect and devoutness. Now that, to our thinking, is the precise opposite of the truth. The truth is that a perfect freedom of thought is not only consistent with the sincerest piety, but it is really the only atmosphere in which the holiest piety can grow. We ought to teach our children with utmost care the Unitarian conception of Jesus,— Jesus the mortal, the man, therefore the hero, therefore the exemplar. We ought to point out to them that there can be no real heroism in a being who knows beforehand the great results of his sacrifices or his sufferings. Foreknowledge excludes all heroism. Foreknowledge of result destroys the essence of sacrifice. There was no sacrifice if there was foreknowledge of the prodigious result. All heroism, all pathos, is taken out of the life of Jesus when he ceases to be for us

the human being. But do we teach our children th
Do we say that of Jesus in our churches and our hom
Not so clearly as we ought. We have often failed to
sent with perfect clearness our own conception of Je
our leader, our master, our guide.

I was to speak to you on education. I wanted e
cially to speak of the kind of education which Unita
children ought to have. My conviction is that this is
kind of education that all children ought to have.

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